

George F. Will

Carl Bernstein

On CIA and the Press

It is said by and about journalists that they always should have an "adversary relationship" with their government. But that does not describe most journalists' daily experiences, or any journalist's real range of duties.

The question of journalists' responsibilities is raised in the October issue of "Rolling Stone," a magazine principally concerned with pop music. Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame, writes that approximately 400 journalists have cooperated with the CIA over the years. Bernstein does not reach thumping judgments, if only because he seems to assume that only one judgment—disapproval—is possible regarding cooperation with the CIA.

But Bernstein's language blurs important distinctions. For example, in 1963, columnist Joseph Alsop went to the Philippines at the suggestion of a friend in the CIA. Alsop and his friend hoped that his reporting might prevent the left from stealing the election.

Bernstein cites this as an example of how journalists "have secretly carried out assignments for" the CIA. Actually only God, and He only deferentially, could give Alsop an "assignment."

The 400 journalists Bernstein writes about include some who allegedly have been asked by the CIA to do something unrelated to journalism (for example, recruit a foreign national); and some who have been asked by the CIA to go somewhere and share their findings with the CIA; and others who traveled somewhere without CIA prompting but shared their findings.

Some news organizations allegedly have given film to the CIA, have provided credentials for CIA "cover" abroad, have allowed journalists to act as intermediaries for the CIA in dealing with foreign nationals and have received CIA subsidies.

Because of skittishness all around, the illusion that the Cold War is over, and the current notion that the CIA is pitch that should not be touched, cooperation between journalists and the CIA has decreased. But much of what used to occur was good craftsmanship, and good citizenship, by newsmen.

Some journalists abroad have routinely visited CIA agents in countries they covered. It is a journalist's job to develop information sources. That also is the CIA's job, so agents have asked journalists to brief them about what they learn.

In this way the U.S. government has learned information journalists were going to publish and other observations

that, for whatever reason, they were not going to publish. What the journalists did was not only professionally permissible (bartering information is part of the journalist's art, and sharing information is the essence of his trade) but civically praiseworthy. And foreign governments have no grounds for objecting when journalists report to anyone observations they have been free to make.

Other forms of cooperation with the CIA are more problematic because they may compromise, or seem to compromise, the independence of the news system, and may jeopardize the freedom of all U.S. journalists to operate in particular countries. No reporter should be a paid agent, because (among other reasons) his life may depend on being able to deny such a relationship convincingly.

But few other forms of cooperation are inherently, meaning "in all situations," impermissible. Life is not so safe and simple, and journalists are not so special, that they have no obligations except to the professional code they write for themselves.

Journalists have been haunted by the fact that some news organizations knew of preparations for the Bay of Pigs invasion and might have prevented a fiasco had they ignored government pleas for secrecy. This, and the fact that journalists, even more than most Americans, believe they have been lied to more than necessary, have caused some journalists to conclude that the controlling principle of their profession is to regard the government as simply an "adversary."

The "adversary" idea has about it the antiauthority aroma of the day. It also spares the media the pain of exercising judgment about difficult matters, such as when to publish information that could damage the national interest (for example, diplomatic secrets), and when to cooperate with important government purposes (for example, intelligence gathering).

The "adversary" idea allows journalists to believe that they are not obligated to consider how any particular action affects the national interest. According to this convenient doctrine, the national interest is the government's problem, and the government is an "adversary."

No simple catchphrase explains the proper relationship of news people to their government. But the problem with the "adversary relationship" can be stated simply: Journalists are, if not citizens first, at least citizens also.